
Students' Perspectives of English within University Subculture in Sri Lanka: Resentment or Acceptance?

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ABSTRACT: This study investigates Sri Lankan undergraduate students' perceptions of the English language within the context of a technological study program conducted in the English medium. Despite global prominence of English as a vital communication tool, over the years many undergraduates in Sri Lanka have exhibited poor communicative competence in English often influenced by the so-called 'university subculture' that perceives English as a marker of social class, status, and power due to its historical significance. This study explores whether resentment towards the English language still persists within university subculture or if there has been a significant shift towards accepting the language as a valuable asset in the face of globalization and technological advancement. Data for the study were collected by administering an online questionnaire to a randomly selected sample of 255 second semester students who were enrolled in a technological study programme affiliated with a government university in Sri Lanka in 2024. The objectives include analyzing historical and socio-cultural factors that shaped undergraduates' perceptions toward English and to assess whether resentment towards the language still persists or whether there is a positive shift towards accepting it as a necessary tool. The study aims to provide insights into the complex dynamics of language perception in a post-colonial context, contributing to broader discussions on language, identity and social mobility in contemporary Sri Lanka.

KEY WORDS: perceptions, post-colonial context, university subculture

1.1 EDUCATION DURING THE COLONIAL PERIOD

The British East India Company seized control of the maritime regions of Sri Lanka (then Ceylon) in 1796 leading to the coexistence of the English language with the island's two native languages, Sinhala and Tamil. In 1815, the entire island came under British rule, officially becoming a part of the British Empire. The British colonizers, in an effort to establish English as the working language of the country, officially declared English, the language of administration, education, and the courts of law in 1832 (Coparahewa, 2011). This led to many social, political, and cultural changes taking place including English becoming a sign of social mobility and the emergence of an English proficient middle class.

Many reforms took place in the country following the recommendations of the Colebrooke-Cameron Commission appointed by the British in 1833 including English being established as the medium of instruction in education (Mendis, 1956, cited in Walisundara & Hettiarachchi). These recommendations elevated the status of English over the island's two native languages, Sinhala and Tamil. Consequently, until 1956, English enjoyed a privileged status as the *de facto* language of Sri Lanka.

Jayasuriya (1976) notes that schools were classified based on the extent to which English or one of the national languages was used as the medium of instruction. This resulted in three types of schools: fee-levying English medium Missionary Schools, Bilingual Schools, and Vernacular State Schools. Students who could afford to pay fees were admitted to the lower kindergarten of Missionary Schools. Bilingual Schools were either English-Sinhala or English-Tamil schools and students studied in their mother tongue for the first five years. From the sixth to the eighth year, both English and Sinhala or Tamil were used as the medium of instruction shifting to purely English medium instruction in the ninth year. Students then faced the Senior School Certificate (SSC) in English. As a result of this educational structure, those educated in English gained significant advantages leading to imbalances in opportunities for those who studied in their native languages. The less privileged continued their education in Sinhala or Tamil languages which limited their chances for upward social mobility. This disparity contributed to the emergence of an English-educated urban middle class, creating tension between urban bilinguals and the rural population educated in Sinhala / Tamil medium. Mendis (1956) records that the number of children receiving nominal instruction in public and private schools across the island amounted to 12,000 in a population of 900,000, with those taught in English not exceeding 800. Thus, the majority were deprived of the opportunity of learning English as the colonial authorities aimed at fulfilling their requirements for "lower echelon administrative tasks" with English educated youth. (Baldsing, 2013, cited in Liyanage, 2021).

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1.2 ENGLISH DURING POST-COLONIAL PERIOD

After gaining dominion status from British rule in 1948, the newly elected Sinhalese Prime Minister, S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike as a result of pressure from the *Swabasha* movement led by Sinhala patriots, introduced the controversial Official Language Act of 1956, commonly known as the Sinhala Only Act, of 1957. Consequently, Sinhala was established as the official language of the country. Following this decision, the elevated status enjoyed by English began to wane, resulting in divisions between the Sinhalese and other minority communities in the country. In 1987, in response to strong opposition from Tamil-speaking communities, the Thirteenth Amendment to the 1978 Constitution recognized both Sinhala and Tamil as official languages of Sri Lanka while English was designated as the link language. Subsequently, the Sixteenth Amendment to the 1978 Constitution replaced Articles 22, 23, and 24, declaring both Sinhala and Tamil as the languages of administration (The Constitution of Sri Lanka, Chapter IV).

Although English retains its status as the link language by the Constitution, no fundamental change occurred in the sphere of linguistic hegemony. English continues to hold a privileged status in the country, as the implementation of open economic policies in 1977 ensured its dominance in commerce, technology and science. Until the late 1970s, the private sector preferred to employ English-educated youth from specific social backgrounds leaving limited opportunities for *Swabasha*-educated graduates (Ranasingha & Ranasingha, 2012). Consequently, English became socially prestigious, as individuals in high-ranking positions in both state and private institutions, as well as those politically influential were often fluent in English (Ratwatte, 2012). However, as noted in previous research (Kandiah, 1984, 1999 as cited in Ratwatte, 2012) this situation gave rise to two speech communities in Sri Lanka: The Anglophone 'elite' for whom English was a resource, and the national bourgeoisie (Samarakkody, 2001) who considered English a problem or barrier.

The majority of the non-English educated masses perceived English as a hindrance to advancement. This group, often referred to as "low proficient, disadvantaged, and deprived," developed growing hostility towards the English language. They used the Sinhala term '*Kaduwa*', meaning 'sword' to symbolize English as a weapon of subjugation and oppression. The elitism and linguistic superiority associated with English created unrest among poorer middle-class youth, culminating in a revolt in 1971 led by university students.

In this context, to promote English at both national and grassroots levels, consecutive governments have taken steps to implement numerous policy initiatives since 1977. Recent measures include the introduction of General English at the GCE Advanced Level examination in 1999, the launch of the *Activity-Based Oral English* (ABOE) program for primary grades in 2000, and the publication of the '*Let's Learn English*' textbook series for grades 3, 4, and 5, as well as '*A Journey Through English*' for grades 6-11. These efforts reflect a commitment to improving English language skills of students in the country.

1.3 BILINGUAL EDUCATION POLICY IN SRI LANKA

In an effort to facilitate students entering the workforce or seeking higher education opportunities in the sciences, Sri Lanka's current Bilingual Education Policy was initiated in 2001 (MOE Circular No: 2001/05 of 23.02.2001). This policy made GCE Advanced Level science stream courses available to students in the English Medium. According to the circular, the policy initiative for junior secondary level (Grades 6-8) aimed at facilitating GCE Advanced Level science stream students to study their subjects in English Medium beginning from May 2001. However, labelling this new initiative as 'English Medium' proved to be 'a mistake' as schools began to implement 'English Medium' instruction across all grades creating tension between students in English medium classes and those in mother-tongue medium classes (Madawattegedara, 2015). Wickremagama et al. (2010) reported about a petition submitted to the then-President requesting that bilingual education stream students should not be mixed with monolingual education students. Additionally, Madawattegedara (ibid) too reported an incident involving a student from an English medium class who got into a fight with a student from a mother-tongue medium class calling her a 'Sinhala medium bitch'. Furthermore, she noted that some parents strongly objected to their children who were studying selected subjects in English mingling with mother-tongue medium students.

Consequently, the Ministry issued another circular (MOE Circular No: 2003/18) which forbade the establishment of exclusively English medium classes especially at primary level. The circular emphasized that school principals were only authorized to teach selected subjects in English from Grade VI onward. In 2008, another circular titled (MOE Circular No: 2008/30) "*The Implementation of the New Syllabus in Grades VI-XI*" redefined "English Medium" instruction as "Bilingual Education." This change aimed to shift public attitudes encouraging people to view English not merely as an ornament that can be used to bring about discrimination and social division but to see it as something 'ordinary'.

1.4 RESEARCH PROBLEM

Language policy, planning and implementation in Sri Lanka have created a complex environment where language serves not only as a tool for communication but also as a significant determinant of social divisions. In the 1970s and 80s, the English-educated minority were perceived as elitists, privileged, educated, and linguistically superior while the non-English educated masses were regarded as underprivileged, uneducated, and deprived. Consequently, non-English educated masses refer to English as '*Kaduwa*', a term that conveys hostility towards the language.

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Research conducted over the past decade in the faculties of Arts, Humanities, and Social Sciences on the perceptions of English among undergraduates confirms that this resentment towards English still persists among undergraduates. However, studies examining the perceptions of English among students in Science, Technology, and Engineering faculties are limited. Thus, this study aims at investigating whether English is still considered a tool of subjugation and oppression among undergraduates in these faculties or whether there has been a positive shift towards recognizing the language as a valuable asset in the context of globalization and technological advancements. Findings of the study would contribute to a broader understanding of undergraduate students' perspectives on the English language in Sri Lanka and pave the way for further research into perceptions on the language across different disciplines and demographics in Sri Lanka.

1.5 AIM

The aim of the study is to explore whether resentment towards the English language still persists or if there has been a significant shift towards acceptance of the language as a valuable asset in the face of globalization and technological advancements among undergraduates learning English as a Second Language in Sri Lanka.

2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Place of English in the University Subculture

In a bid to enhance global competitiveness and employability of graduates, higher education reforms introduced in 1997 placed emphasis on English as a medium of instruction. As a result, universities began to offer a mix of English, Sinhala, and Tamil medium programs, with English increasingly becoming the preferred medium of instruction for STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) fields. English Language Teaching Units (ELTUs) had already been established in universities in the 1980s to support English proficiency of students. A degree, preferably in the English medium, obtained from a public university in Sri Lanka was considered the primary qualification for receiving a well-paid job both in the public and private sectors of the country as well (Liyanage, 2019).

According to Widiyalankara (2009b), those educated in English were viewed as 'elitists, privileged, and linguistically superior' and for the non-English educated masses English became a weapon of subjugation, oppression and frustration. The English Language Teaching Units (ELTU) at universities were referred to as a '*kammala*' (forge) or the blacksmiths who turn out swords. Similarly, Gunesefera (2010b) records that "in the 1970s and the 80s, the distinction in the Sri Lankan universities was between the '*Haras*' who were not proficient in English and the '*Kults*' who were proficient in English. These two student communities are today known as the "raggers" and the "anti-raggers" respectively. This distinction is further explored in Nagahawatte (2016) and Wijesinghe (2020) who note that undergraduates often refer to English as '*Kaduwa*' which is used as a descriptor of hatred towards English.

Ranasinghe and Ranasinghe (2012) investigated the perceptions of 96 university students following Management Studies on the role played by English in career choices and social mobility. As they state, the students rated English proficiency as crucial for higher education and obtaining desirable employment in the private sector. However, over 60% of the respondents agreed with the statement, "English creates an unnecessary barrier for rural youth in our society"- highlighting the discrimination and lack of opportunities faced by rural youth due to a lack of communication skills in English.

Rathnayake (2013) stated that student politics took a center stage at University of Ruhuna. During the first semester, senior students unofficially take charge of the juniors preventing interaction with academic staff. They even go to the extent of preventing juniors from attending English classes. Further, he records that negative attitude instilled in students during initial stages at university cause absenteeism in English classes.

De Silva and Devendra (2014) investigated the needs and expectations of Sri Lankan ESL undergraduates enrolled in English for General Academic Purposes (EGAP) module and found that undergraduates were well-aware of the requirement of English for various social needs, including communication, recreation, and personal development. Additionally, they identified English proficiency as a fundamental requirement for employment in the private sector.

A study by Chandradasa and Jayawardane (2017) which involved a sample of 225 undergraduates from the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences at University of Ruhuna revealed that first-year students often cannot utter a single word in English during the ragging season. During English lectures, these students either sleep or engage in tasks assigned by senior students such as memorizing political slogans, descriptions, and university graffiti. Furthermore, the study indicated that English is viewed as detrimental to 'batch fit'(cohesion) among undergraduates with many considering it the language of the colonizers. As a result, batch trips and meetings are often scheduled during the time allocated for English.

Liyanage (2019) found that many students as well as some academic staff members within the university community hold on to narrow nationalist ideologies and consider the mother tongue to be entirely sufficient for all academic and social interaction and in this context use of English was often regarded as unpatriotic. The study noted that although not universally accepted, these beliefs were maintained within the university subculture to uphold ideological and political control over students. For instance, especially during the hazing period, senior students ban freshmen from speaking in English and even the slightest use of English words when

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speaking in Sinhala or Tamil led to verbal or /and physical harassment and also noted that the student associations viewed the English Language Teaching Unit (ELTU) as the main enemy of the student subculture and an agent of western values.

Perera and Perera (2024) conducted a survey using a randomly selected sample of 69 final-year students in the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences of University of Sri Jayewardenepura in the 2016-2017 academic year. According to the survey 87% of respondents had given priority to activities organized by the senior students instead of attending English lectures and 83% of the students had been harassed whenever they spoke in English in their first year.

In summary, the role of English in the university subculture in Sri Lanka is complex characterized by class distinctions, nationalist sentiments, and significant peer influence. However, as the previous literature on the influence of university subculture on English language is mostly limited to Arts, Socials Sciences and Humanities, this study will provide significant insights into the influence of the university sub culture and student associations towards English language learning at technological institutions.

3.0 METHODOLOGY

This quantitative study was conducted at a technological institution affiliated with a leading government university in Sri Lanka using a population of students who had sat for the GCE A/L exam in the mathematics stream in 2023 and selected for the study program based on their Z-scores.

Similar to other state-owned universities, the student association of this institution is active and serves as the primary voice for students representing their grievances and interests to the administration. Various functions / events organized by the student association, such as the 'Social', 'Going Down', 'Bucket', 'Batch Trip 'Batch party', 'Kuppi' (learning with peers), 'Weekly meeting hour' demonstrate that the subculture at the institute is similar to that of other universities in Sri Lanka.

To gather students' perceptions, an online questionnaire was administered to a random sample of 255 students following semester-two academic studies in civil engineering technology, mechanical engineering technology, information technology and electrical and electronics engineering technologies. The sample comprised 67.3% males and 32.7% females, with 84.1% identified as Sinhala and 15.9% as Tamil students. Additionally, 56.3% had attended government urban schools, 23.6% government rural schools, 18.8% government semi-urban schools, and 1.2% private schools.

The online questionnaire collected demographic information of the respondents and then their perceptions towards English in terms of instrumental value and extra linguistic value offered to English, linguistic environment within the institution, the impact of subculture on English and whether they consider English as a tool of oppression or empowerment.

Demographic information gathered from respondents reflected that all participants had sufficient exposure to the English language as all students are following their lectures in English medium at the institute and they refer to English textbooks, websites and YouTube videos to gather information. Out of 255 participants, 68% of the students currently refer English textbooks and websites, while 65.2% listen to English YouTube videos to gather information for their assignments. Additionally, 59.3% watch English TV series and movies, indicating that these students have considerable exposure to the English language.

4.0 RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

Table one summarizes instrumental value of English.

Table 1. Instrumental Value of English

Statement	Agree	Partially Agree	Disagree
Proficiency of English is necessary for me to succeed academically.	97.6%	2%	0.4%
Proficiency of English is necessary to obtain employment in the public sector in Sri Lanka.	84.3%	14.5 %	1.2 %
Proficiency of English is necessary to obtain employment in the private sector in Sri Lanka.	97.2%	2.8%	0%
Proficiency of English is necessary for higher studies.	99.2%	0.8%	0%
Proficiency of English is essential for global communication.	98.8%	1.2 %	0%
Proficiency of English is important to gain knowledge.	99.2%	0.8%	0%
Proficiency of English is essential to gain social prestige.	84.2%	14.2%	1.6%

Accordingly, a significant majority of the respondents believed that English proficiency is crucial for academic success and employment, especially in the private sector and in higher education as most of the resources are predominantly available in English.

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Furthermore, the undergraduates are aware of the fact that English serves as a *lingua franca* in international settings. This indicates that today the undergraduates are well aware of the instrumental value of English and the role it plays in academic and professional settings. Additionally, results suggest that undergraduates believe English to be a vital factor for social prestige and recognition in Sri Lanka.

Table 2. Extra linguistic Value on English

Statement	Yes	May be	No
English is often viewed as more prestigious than local languages (Sinhala and Tamil) in higher education, as well as in social and professional settings.	55.5 %	28.7%	15.7%

As depicted in Table 2, over half of the respondents (55.5%) believed that English is more prestigious than local languages. This suggests that within the student community English holds a superior status and they have given extra linguistic value to English possibly due to imperialistic attitudes that have been prevailing over the years as a result of a colonial hangover. Particularly, this can be attributed to the colonial legacy that positioned English as the language of power, education and economic advancement. Such imperialistic attitudes have persisted over the years creating a societal narrative where proficiency in English is equated with intelligence and success, thereby reinforcing its superior status.

Table 3 presents the results of the study in terms of the environment within the Institution for students to learn English.

Table 3. Environment within the Institution

Statement	Yes	No	May be
Those who speak in English, or are competent in English are marginalized within the Institution.	4.8%	86.1 %	9.2 %
Senior students prohibit the juniors from speaking in English during semester 1 (hazing period)?	10%	90%	0%
Students who spoke in English during semester 1 (hazing period) were physically/ verbally harassed.	6.3%	93.7%	0%
Use of English within the Institution negatively impact 'batch fit'	20.7%	79.3%	0%

As indicated in Table 2, only 4.8% of respondents believed that those who speak or are competent in English are socially marginalized within the institution. The majority (86.1%) disagreed with this statement indicating that students did not face significant social exclusion or discrimination within the environment. Only 10% of respondents indicated that senior students prohibited them speaking in English during the hazing period. This low percentage implies that such prohibition was not a widespread practice as 90% reported that there was no prohibition against speaking in English. Similarly, a minimal percentage (6.3%) of respondents believed that students who spoke in English during the hazing period faced physical or verbal harassment. The vast majority (93.7%) disagree indicating that harassment based on English language use is not a common practice during this time. Overall, the data suggest that the notion of class distinction among those who are competent in English and those who are not competent in English is gradually disappearing within Sri Lankan higher education institutes and there is no widespread prohibition against English use.

ESL facilitators report that most Tamil students engage with their Sinhala peers in English and nearly 95% of the student community meets the attendance requirements, qualifying them to take the semester 1 and semester 2 English exams each year. Additionally, it has been noted that the majority of students are upper-intermediate learners who actively participate in English oral assessments, including presentations, public speaking, and group discussions, as well as in English language competitions held such as the Best Presenters' and Best Speakers' competitions organized by the English club. Moreover, for the past five years, English language proficiency has been regarded as a crucial criterion by the student community when selecting the President of the Student Association. Overall, the data suggests the existence of a supportive environment for speaking in English during the orientation period and thereafter, with minimal reports of marginalization, prohibition, or harassment reported.

Table 3 below indicates the influence of the Student Association on English language learning.

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Table 4. Influence of the Students' Association on English Learning

Statement	True	False	No Involvement
The Students' Association encourages learning English.	51%	9.5%	39.5%
The Students' Association supports English Club activities.	59.4%	5.7%	34.8%
The Students' Association tries to spread hatred towards learning and speaking in English as it is considered the language of colonizer.	0%	56.3%	43.7%

Results show that a higher percentage of students perceive that the students' association encourages learning English and supports English club activities whereas an average of 37% mention that the students' association does not involve itself or make decisions regarding English language learning which highlight the fact that the association neither discourages nor impose restrictions on English language activities within the institution.

Table 5 . Summary of Results of Semester 1 (ELSE 1) & Semester II (ELSE 11) Examinations

Grade	Number	Percentage	Grade	Number	Percentage
A (A+, A and A-)	159	20.71	A (A+, A and A-)	60	7.71
B (B+, B and B-)	290	37.76	B (B+, B and B-)	304	39.07
C (C+ and C)	226	29.43	C (C+ and C)	314	40.36
I-FE	37	4.82	I-FE	58	7.46
AB	12	1.56	AB	07	0.9
Not Eligible	44	5.73	Not Eligible	27	3.47
Total	768		Total	770	

As revealed by the ESL facilitators, before the semester system was introduced to the curriculum of the institute, English was a non-GPA subject. Consequently, the students' association discouraged students from achieving higher grades in English as it was detrimental to 'batch fit' (cohesion). However, after the semester system was introduced, there has been a gradual improvement of results. Particularly students' results in the last two semesters clearly indicate that such perspectives are no longer prevalent as the majority has obtained distinction and merit passes for English recognizing the importance of English in their academic journey. Moreover, the percentage of students who were not eligible to sit the exams due to poor attendance ranged from 3% to 6%. This highlights the fact that approximately 95% of students fulfill the attendance requirement at lectures each semester. The results obtained by students indicate that the majority within the institution consider English as yet another important module although their focus is on their field subjects. At the same time, special attention needs to be given to only around 8% of the students who fail the module (I-FE) this group could have a negative effect on the student population and create a source of unrest among the students. Thus additional support or intervention strategies may be necessary to assist these students in improving their performance.

Table 6. Notion of 'Kaduwa' (Sword)

Question	Yes	No
Is English referred to as <i>Kaduwa</i> ?	62.4%	37.6 %

Table 7. Meaning of 'Kaduwa'

Meaning	Yes
Defend yourself, protect yourself	35.3 %
Oppression, subjugation	13.9 %
No idea	50.8 %

The data presented in Table 4 reveal that 62.4% of respondents refer to English as '*Kaduwa*', indicating a significant prevalence of this term within the student population. Despite this usage, a notable 37.6% do not refer to English in this manner. Among those who use the term, as depicted in Table 5, the majority lack a clear understanding of why they refer to English as '*Kaduwa*'. This lack of awareness points to the adoption of the term without a deeper comprehension of its implications or origins. Among those who do have an opinion, 35.3% associate '*Kaduwa*' with the idea of defending and protecting oneself, indicating that they see English as a tool for empowerment and self-defense in academic and professional contexts. Conversely, 13.9% associate the term

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with "oppression, subjugation," highlighting an awareness of the colonial legacy and its role in perpetuating social hierarchies. Overall, analyses of data suggest that, while the term, 'Kaduwa' is widely used among students, its connotations are not uniformly understood. The positive association of English with self-defense and empowerment contrasts sharply with the recognition of its oppressive potential. This duality reflects the complexities of language identity and cultural and linguistic power dynamics within the student body.

Table 8. Perceptions towards English

Statement	Yes	No	May be
English creates an unnecessary barrier for rural youth.	62.9%	37.1%	0%
Speaking in English is an attempt at 'showing off' / showing one's social status.	7.9%	41.7%	50.4%

A significant majority (62.9%) of respondents believe that English creates an unnecessary barrier for rural youth. This indicates a strong sentiment to the fact that the language may hinder access to opportunities or resources. This may be due to poor communication skills among some of the students from government universities. However, the 37.1% who disagree indicates that there is still a notable portion of the population that does not perceive English as a barrier, suggesting that some may see it as an opportunity rather than an obstacle. This indicates that although the majority of the students do not view English as a means of social status, a small fraction still believes that proficiency in English can create social division.

5.0 DISCUSSION

Studies conducted by Rathnayake (2013), Chandradasa and Jayawardane (2017), Liyanage (2019) and Perera and Perera (2024), collectively highlight the significant impact of student politics and cultural attitudes on English language acquisition among undergraduates in Sri Lankan universities, particularly at the University of Ruhuna and the University of Sri Jayewardenepura. Overall, these studies illustrate a challenging environment for English language learning, shaped by political dynamics, cultural attitudes, and social pressures within university settings.

However, the current study reveals that students are well aware of the importance of English for employment and social mobility, as highlighted in the works of Ranasingha and Ranasinha (2012) and De Silva and Devendra (2014). It also indicates that the student association does not negatively impact English language use within the institution; there are no prohibitions against speaking English, nor is there any physical or verbal harassment based on English language use.

While Gunasekara (2020b), Nagahawatte (2016), and Wijesingha (2020) mention the existence of two student groups within the subculture - 'anti-raggers' and 'raggers' based on their language proficiency, this study contradicts their findings. Although the terms 'anti-raggers' and 'raggers' still exist within the institution, this division is not based on language competency. Nevertheless, similar to Ranasinha and Ranasinha (2012), the study confirms that while students recognize the added value of English, the majority still believes that it can create unnecessary barriers for rural youth. Notably, the term 'Kaduwa,' coined by undergraduates in the 1970s to express antagonism toward English, appears to be gradually fading from the subculture, as most students are unfamiliar with the term.

6.0 CONCLUSION

Driven by globalization and advancements in technology, English language seems to be regaining a strong position in HEIs in Sri Lanka as the majority of students acknowledge the need for English proficiency for higher studies and career advancement. While historical attitudes have often framed English as a tool of elitism and oppression, the findings of this study indicate a significant shift towards recognizing its value as a critical asset for academic success and career advancement. Moreover, within the institute community English holds a superior status, possibly due to the colonial legacy that positioned English as the language of power, education and economic advancement. In addition, the findings reveal that the notion of class divisions based on English is disappearing and that there is no widespread prohibition against English language use within the institute subculture.

However, a significant majority of students (62.9%) still believe that English creates an unnecessary barrier for rural youth. This perception may stem from poor communication skills or a lack of communication skills among the majority of students from government universities despite higher levels of comprehension. Thus, immediate attention should be given to improving the language skills of low-proficiency undergraduates who enroll in undergraduate programmes before their frustration or negative perceptions of English could lead to unrest. Identifying these students with little or no exposure to English can be done at departmental level during the pre-academic programmes at universities. A tailor-made English language program with regular monitoring and individual attention, would undoubtedly have a positive impact on students' English language learning.

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Given that this study is confined to an institution offering a technological program in English affiliated with a leading engineering university in Sri Lanka, any generalization of the findings to other universities and faculties should be approached with caution. Nevertheless, this research provides valuable insights into students' perceptions of English among undergraduates in Sri Lanka, highlighting the necessity for ongoing research across diverse disciplines.

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